



The Wandering Jew In The West

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ONE OF THE MOST significant references to the legend of the Wandering Jew is made by Oswald Spengler in his monumental work, *The Decline of the West*. He discusses the presence of the Jews in Medieval Europe:

...The Jew could not comprehend the Gothic inwardness, the castle, the Cathedral; nor the Christian the Jew's superior, almost cynical, intelligence and his finished expertness in 'money-thinking.' There was much mutual hate and contempt... It was in this period that the legend of the Wandering Jew arose...

The legend of the Wandering Jew that Spengler mentions has taken many forms, and varies in many details, but the version best known to Western Civilization is this. A Jew, variously described as a shoemaker or a soldier in Pontius Pilate's army, somehow offends Jesus, verbally or physically, while He is bearing the Cross to Calvary. Jesus thereupon curses the Jew, commanding that he remain alive on earth until His second coming. Since that time, the Jew has wandered the world. Some versions state that he has repented his transgression, others that he has not. Some describe him as always having the look of an old man, while in others he is said to age for a certain time, whereupon his youth is magically renewed and he begins to age anew.

Is this famous legend only a story, or does it (as Spengler implies) represent a profound evaluation of the Medieval Jew *vis-a-vis* Western Man?

The Offense to Jesus

As a people, race, or whatever, the Jews offered the worst possible offense to Jesus—they murdered Him. The Wandering Jew likewise offended, either by striking or jeering at Him, such that he received a special curse.

It is important to note at this point that the Medieval Christians had none of the current fashionable doubts about the collective guilt of the Jews for Jesus' death. Both Holy Scripture and tradition backed up the concept of the Jews as Christ-killers. The Gentile peoples—including the Westerners—bore no such guilt. It was the sole possession of the Jews, for no Gentile had knowingly harmed Christ in any way while he was alive on earth. Thus, the guilt of the Wandering Jew is clearly symbolic of the guilt of the Jews.

The Immortality of the Jews

The Immortality of the Wandering Jew also has great significance, which has unfortunately been largely ignored by folklorists and historians, probably because of the existence of many other long-lived legendary

figures. However, the great majority of them are not truly immortal, but are in some sort of suspended animation, scheduled to *return* to life at some future time. Merlin, Arthur and Barbarossa are examples.

I propose that the immortality with which Jesus cursed the Wandering Jew is symbolic of the high degree of life-tenacity displayed by the Jews during their long sojourn in the hostile, alien West. Jewry must have seemed immortal to the Westerner, whose own nations and institutions were so comparatively young and innovative. Moreover, despite pogroms, massacres, and restrictions, some last-minute decree by Pope or King seemed always to save the Jews from destruction so they could prosper once more, their vitality in no way diminished.

The Jewish "Nomads"

The Jewish race is indeed a nation of wanderers much like the Wandering Jew. Only the Gypsies rival their talents in this direction. (I should point out here that groups usually called *nomads*, such as the Arabs of the desert and some primitive tribes, are not true wanderers, for they have a limited territory in which they habitually move about. This is not true of the wanderings of the Jews and Gypsies.) The Western farmer or villager seldom ventured more than a few miles from his birthplace throughout his life. The Jews, who had few if any roots, must have seemed to be wanderers indeed to the Western folk—and they ought to seem all the more so today, with such footloose examples as Golda Meir and Henry Kissinger in evidence.

In fact, the Jews have for centuries complained and boasted of their landless condition. Even before the birth of the West, in Charlemagne's time, the Jews had accumu-

lated a tradition and reputation for *diaspora* and wandering. They had often been expelled from their homes, and had as frequently changed residence by choice, owing to their professions as moneylenders and merchants. Such promiscuous tourism was astonishing and incomprehensible to the Westerner, who had his roots in soil and fatherland, as Spengler points out. Surely, then, the wanderer element in the legend can signify nothing other than the European awareness of the rootlessness of the Jews.

The Multilingual Jews

Almost without exception, the Wandering Jew is said to be able to speak all languages. In particular, of course, he can always speak the dialect of the country he happens to be in at the time, but there are stories in which he is examined in several languages and proves himself the master of them all.* This ability of the wandering Jew is clearly an exaggeration of the linguistic talents of the cosmopolitan polyglot Jew, who must have seemed omnilingual indeed to the Medieval Westerner. The latter, for the most part, had only one language, while the typical Jew spoke at least the local language and his native Yiddish or Hebrew, and most likely another language or so as well.

The Wealth of the Jews

Another frequent theme of the legend that is strongly suggestive of a general Jewish trait is that of the "inexhaustible purse." The Wandering Jew is said to have a purse containing two, five, or some other

(Continued on Page 55)

*See George K. Anderson, *The Legend of the Wandering Jew* (Providence, 1965) for excellent descriptions of this theme and the others mentioned.

he had not even been indicted, and got a sentence of only one year, which he is serving in a safe penitentiary.

Colson and others had sought unsuccessfully a change of venue to another jurisdiction where they could expect a fairer trial: they all knew that the vicious Washington Negro jurors would find them guilty on every count and recommend maximum sentence. All their requests for change of venue were turned down by Judge Sirica. And when they appealed to the U.S. Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court, all their appeals were summarily rejected. And the reason so many other Nixon aides testified against each other was that Prosecutor Jaworski had promised them that they would get light sentences or suspended sentences and that they

would thus avoid the Black Hole of Calcutta of the Negro-dominated courts and prisons.

Remarkably, none of the defense lawyers who sought a change of venue for the Watergate defendants mentioned in their pleas the obvious and most imperative reason for such a change: that the Washington juries were over 95% Negro and that practically every Negro in Washington hates Nixon and the men identified with him. And the news media that covered the Watergate trials with such great detail did not even hint that the Negroes would wreak vengeance on anyone connected with Nixon. Yet, every reporter who covers criminal trials in Washington knows that it is true and that the chances of a White person being acquitted by a D.C. jury are those of a snowball in hell.

Wandering Jew

(Continued from Page 33)

number of coins, specified or unspecified. These coins, when spent, either find their way magically back into his purse or are automatically replaced by others. In the latter case, the purse would simply symbolize the wealth of the European Jews, seemingly limitless to his Western contemporaries. In the former case, the *returning* coins must stand for the money lent out and ruthlessly recovered by the Jewish moneylender. In Medieval times, such money-symbolism could have applied only to Jews, for it wasn't until the beginning of the Reformation that usury was permitted to Gentiles.

The Importance of the Legend

The Wandering Jew, then, as blasphemer, immortal, wanderer, polyglot and usurer, is a personifi-

cation of the whole Jewish race. The basic themes of the legend have survived through the centuries, not for whatever literary value they might have, but for their expression of the Folk-wisdom of the West. The legend has also been utilized by writers both past and present as a basis for the portrayal of the Jewish problem. An excellent example of such work is George Sylvester Viereck and Paul Eldridge's *My First Two Thousand Years* (1963), which is recommended to the reader, though it is somewhat difficult to obtain, perhaps as a result of Viereck's incarceration for sedition during World War II.

As an expression of the collective European world-view, the Legend of the Wandering Jew is of great importance to an understanding of the significance of the Jew in history.